

De-Semitizing Ibn ‘Arabī: Aryanism and the Schuonian Discourse of Religious Authenticity¹

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Abstract

Commonly taken to be based upon the metaphysics of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), Frithjof Schuon’s Perennialist doctrine of “the transcendent unity of religions” posits a timeless truth underlying all so-called orthodox religious forms. Yet this article argues that rather than a transhistorical message of inclusive unity, Schuon’s Perennialism is a hegemonic discourse of authenticity built upon presuppositions founded within what Léon Poliakov famously dubbed the nineteenth-century “Aryan myth.” The extent to which Schuon decouples Ibn ‘Arabī from so-called Semitic subjectivism, thus finding in him a primordial Aryan objectivity, is the extent to which Schuon claims him to be an enlightened representative of Islam and authentic purveyor of the *religio perennis*.

Keywords

Ibn ‘Arabī – Frithjof Schuon – Aryanism – Sufism – Perennialism – Esotericism

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And when, in play, he stole their veils,
He wished to see himself in Truth’s naked ray.

FRITHJOF SCHUON 2006c: 99

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The notions that we so willingly see as transcendental, aprioristic, or original are almost always those that are most deeply buried in our own cultural memory.

DANIEL DUBUISSON 2003: 196

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The elaboration of the Perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*)² in the second half of the twentieth century by the Swiss German esotericist Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998) remains one of the most dominant discursive fields in the contemporary Western reception of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).³ Although centuries and cultures apart, it is not surprising that Schuon is often compared to Ibn 'Arabī.⁴ Not only did Schuon seemingly share a religious and mystical vocation with the Andalusian Sufi,⁵ but, like Ibn 'Arabī, Schuon's

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- 2 The concept of the *philosophia perennis* was first introduced by Agostino Steuco (d. 1548) in his work *De perenni philosophia* (1540). Although a Catholic bishop who served as the librarian at the Vatican Library, Steuco adhered to a type of "Platonic monism" and believed that true theology "is nothing other than the revealed truth which has been known to mankind from the earliest times" (Schmitt 1966: 515, 518). Schuon's particular lineage originates within the "Traditionalist" school of René Guénon (d. 1951) and should not be confused with Aldous Huxley's independent popularization expressed in his 1944 work, *The Perennial Philosophy*. See Hanegraaff 2006: 1130–1134. While *philosophia perennis* generally serves as an umbrella term, Schuon himself preferred the terms *sophia perennis* and *religio perennis*, stating that it would "be better or more prudent to speak of a '*Sophia perennis*,' since it is not a question of artificial mental constructions, as is all too often the case in philosophy; or again, the primordial wisdom that always remains true to itself could be called '*Religio perennis*,' given that by its nature it in a sense involves worship and spiritual realization" (Schuon 1986b: 534).
 - 3 Ibn 'Arabī is often referred to by his more complete name, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī. Scholars differ as to the common practice of omitting the definite article "al-" from "Ibn al-'Arabī." While some claim it was supposedly adopted so as not to confuse him with his fellow Sevillian, the traditionalist Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1148) (Ateş 1986: 707), others have argued it is simply a result of his popularity among Persian and Turkish speakers who tended to drop the article (Elmore 1999: 38).
 - 4 As Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude assert, "Schuon ranks amongst the Neoplatonist line of the greatest Sufi masters, such as Ibn 'Arabī..." (2004: 72).
 - 5 Schuon embraced Islam in 1932 and was initiated into Sufism by the famous Algerian shaykh Ahmad al-'Alāwī in Mostaganem, Algeria (Nasr 2006: 259, 260 n. 2; Sedgwick 2005: 461).

extensive oeuvre is held by many experts to rank as one of the most profound metaphysical legacies of his age (Quinn 2006: 1043).⁶ The title of Schuon's first major metaphysical treatise, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, has become emblematic of Schuon's entire philosophy, enunciating the existence of a timeless truth unifying and validating all so-called orthodox religious forms beyond the limits of exoteric exclusivity. Yet *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* is not only Schuon's most iconic work, but it is also often taken to be based upon the doctrine of "the Unity of Being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) traditionally associated with Ibn 'Arabī (see, e.g., Geoffroy 2010: 184, 187; Zarcone 1999: 116; Houman 2014: 215).⁷ Indeed, the entire intellectual foundation of Schuon's metaphysics is commonly claimed to be based upon Ibn 'Arabī's ideas. As recently as 2001, James Morris, a leading scholar of Ibn 'Arabī, noted

the profound effect of the abundant writings of F. Schuon in applying the central ideas of Ibn 'Arabī to *articulating* (but in the long run also deeply shaping) an understanding of the spiritual dimensions of religious life appealing profoundly to several generations of philosophers and theologians seeking to develop a comprehensive, non-reductive "philosophy of religions"...

MORRIS 2001: 105–106; emphasis original

However, "[b]ecause of the peculiar vagaries of academic opinion and respectability," Morris concludes that Schuon's "wide-ranging influence is rarely mentioned publicly... *but is to be found virtually everywhere*" (2001: 106; emphasis mine). As both a prolific author and the spiritual leader, or *shaykh*, of the first organized "traditional" European Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*),⁸ Schuon spent more than sixty years expositing his particular brand of universalism while discreetly guiding several communities in Europe and America, thus earning him a small but committed following. In 1991, however, the American Schuonian community

6 Popularly known as "the Greatest Master" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), Ibn 'Arabī is considered by many to have written the single most impressive metaphysical corpus in medieval Islam. Current estimates on the total number of Ibn 'Arabī's writings range from three hundred to four hundred works. See Knysh 1999: 9.

7 While the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* was never explicitly used by Ibn 'Arabī himself, it has come to emblematically represent his unitive metaphysics, signifying God as the ontological reality of all things. See Chittick 1994: 71, 75, 87.

8 In 1936, Schuon "received [an] unexpected grace" giving him "the dazzling and intrinsic certitude that he had been invested with the function of *Shaykh*" for the European branch of the 'Alāwiyya Sufi order, which he maintained until his death (Aymard and Laude 2004: 23). See also n. 5 above.

in Bloomington, Indiana, came under strain when “allegation[s] of ‘thought control’ and ‘sexual rites’” were leveled against Schuon by a disgruntled disciple, eventually leading to an indictment (Fitzgerald 2001: 30). Although the charges were dropped because of insufficient evidence, negative publicity of the episode compromised Schuon’s reputation (Quinn 2006: 1044).

Since Schuon’s death in 1998, however, his thought has undergone something of a renaissance, aided by a steady stream of new translations of his works issued by the Perennialist publishing house World Wisdom in Bloomington. Moreover, in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Perennialist thinkers have sought to bring to a larger audience what they view as the contemporary relevance of Schuon’s so-called transcendent universalism — often in connection with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī — for spreading religious tolerance and engaging in interfaith dialogue. The work of the Perennialist scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi, for example, is permeated with such ideas. Indeed, Shah-Kazemi regularly uses the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī, and those in his school, as evidence of the transhistorical truth of Schuonian Perennialism, which he holds to be “[t]he most eloquent and compelling contemporary expression” of universalism (2002: 141).⁹

Yet such easy linkage between Schuon and Ibn ‘Arabī in the name of “the oneness of religions . . . on the transcendent plane” belies a much more complex and fraught discursive reality (Shah-Kazemi 2006b: 193, 193 n. 1). While it is true that Schuon’s esoteric erudition obliged him to acknowledge Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical genius, Schuon’s universalist avowal of “the relativity of forms” as “the transcendent” truth also impelled him to censure the Andalusian Sufi’s enunciations of the superiority of both Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (Schuon 2006d: 40 n. 29). Indeed, in a 1989 letter, Schuon identifies his own esoteric perspective through the non-dual framework of “Advaita Vedānta” over and above “ordinary Sufism,” which he decries as “a voluntarist, individualist, and moralist anthropology” associated with “an Arabo-Semitic mentality” (quoted in Aymard and Laude 2004: 46). Although James Cutsinger, the foremost academic expert on Schuon, has recently defended such statements as simply emphasizing the fact that Schuon’s “message refuses to be domesticated in the interest of any sectarian aim and cannot be limited by any formal enclosure” (2013: xxx), a close reading of Schuon’s corpus shows otherwise.

Indeed, careful attention to the discursive practices and strategies contained within Schuon’s writings reveals that his message arrived *already* domesticated in a sectarianism particular to the formal enclosure of his own Eurocentrism — an enclosure that has been conveniently ignored or metaphysically justified

9 See also Shah-Kazemi 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2012, 2013.

by his apologetic interpreters. As such, the following article argues that underlying Schuon's so-called universalism is a hegemonic discourse of religious authenticity founded within nineteenth-century Aryanism and its attendant understanding of race as reflective of both physiological *and* spiritual difference. For Schuon, Ibn 'Arabī, like many Muslim mystics, succumbed to a "Semitic" propensity for a subjectivism that lacked the enlightened objectivity necessary to consistently discern the transcendent formlessness of essential truth from religious particularism. Yet such enlightened objectivity is, according to Schuon, inherent in the so-called "Aryan" metaphysics of Vedanta and Platonism. In fact, Schuon's discourse regularly presents as self-evident the metaphysical superiority of a direct and active Aryan "intellection" over that of a so-called passive Semitic "inspirationism." Thus, rather than a transcendent and symbolic nomenclature innocent of its discursive history of racism — as Schuon's loyal devotees often claim¹⁰ — in what follows I throw into relief how Schuonian universalism harbors a buried order of politics ironically constituted by and through long-held European discursive strategies of racial exclusion. Such strategies are not simply empty linguistic survivals but, instead, substantively inform the core of Schuon's metaphysics, providing the impetus to denude Ibn 'Arabī of his own Islamic exclusivism and distill from him a Vedantic essence — that is, a pure esotericism capable of transcending the so-called "Semitic" veils of exoteric religious form. As such, Schuon effectively de-Semitizes Ibn 'Arabī in order to legitimize his own Aryan ideal of authentic religion, the *religio perennis*.

Interrupting Hagiographic Authority: Approaching a Discursive Analysis of Schuon

As part of the posthumous Schuonian renaissance mentioned above, there has been a burgeoning hagiographic literature on Schuon (e.g., Aymard and Laude

10 One such recent Perennialist apologetic explanation of Schuon's religio-racial typology can be found in William Stoddart's *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, where, under the heading "The Meaning of Race," the author notes, "Schuon's view envisages that each of the great religions corresponds to the need of a particular human 'receptacle,' this being either a particular race or else a particular mentality . . ." (2008: 66). While Stoddart's description of Schuon's racial typology faithfully includes a tripartite chart of the world's three races (white, yellow, and black) — which as noted below follows the racial schema famously set forth by Arthur de Gobineau (see n. 43 below) — he feebly attempts to circumvent further discussion by stating that "[t]his issue is too complex to elaborate here . . ." (2008: 66).

2004; Oldmeadow 2010; Fitzgerald 2010), who in this discursive arena is often declared — as the renowned scholar of religion Huston Smith recently put it — “the spiritual prophet of our time *par excellence*” (2013: xiii; emphasis original). As Cutsinger observes in the introduction to his 2013 anthology of Schuon’s writings, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*, those who continue to praise Schuon “in the grandest terms . . . represent the considered judgment of several of the academy’s most prestigious and influential names” (2013: xv). Here, Cutsinger himself comes out, as it were, as a committed Schuonian and relates that his apologetic goal in compiling his anthology is to present some of

the evidence that has led Schuon’s defenders to draw what must otherwise seem excessively flattering conclusions concerning his stature and significance, *while challenging his critics — and the religious studies community as a whole — to give his work a much fuller and more sustained examination than it has so far received.*

CUTSINGER 2013: xvii; emphasis mine

Yet, in order to give Schuon’s work such a “sustained examination,” Cutsinger adds that

[w]e must entertain the possibility . . . that Schuon was someone who actually knew what he was talking about, someone who had apprehended the Truth — with that capital “T” . . . *in a way that cannot be accounted for in terms of sheerly natural causes or purely human phenomena.*

CUTSINGER 2013: xxxii; emphasis mine

Cutsinger thus rather evangelically rehearses a commonplace claim among faithful Schuonians — that Schuon did not understand his material from a “natural” or “human” perspective but instead directly “apprehended the Truth.” Cutsinger goes on to explain that true spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*, involves a total identification with divine truth through “a faculty that Schuon calls the Intellect . . .” (2013: xxxiv). Indeed, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is himself arguably one of the twentieth century’s most prominent religious thinkers,¹¹ had years earlier similarly claimed that “Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect

11 As Huston Smith recently noted, Nasr is the only scholar ever to have the dual honor of inclusion in the Library of Living Philosophers and having delivered the Gifford Lectures in Glasgow, Scotland — published as *Knowledge and the Sacred* in 1981 (Hahn, Auxier, and Stone 2001; Smith 2007: vii).

itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace" (1989: 107).¹² Cutsinger thus crucially defines Schuon's conception of the "Intellect" as the "power of immediate or intuitive discernment . . . *unaffected by the limitations of historical circumstance*" (2013: xxxv; emphasis mine). Thus, according to Cutsinger, to read Schuon "*as if* his insights were tied to certain formulations of language . . . is to misinterpret the *evident authority* of his work . . ." (2013: xxxv; emphasis mine).

Cutsinger's proclamation of Schuon's "evident authority" in tandem with his claim that Schuon's divinely inspired power of Intellect was "unaffected by the limitations of historical circumstance" and freed from the "formulations of language" should give us serious pause. Besides the obvious challenges to Schuon's ethical authority as a spiritual leader posed by anecdotal evidence brought forth in connection with the 1991 scandal mentioned above (see Sardar 1993: 33–36; Urban 2002; Sedgwick 2004: 175–177; Versluis 2014: 167–173),¹³ there are other questions of discursive authority that underscore what is at stake in my present argument. For if we concede to the insider assertion that Schuon's discourse itself reveals a "timeless message" (Nasr 2004: ix), then we also must grant it *transcendent authority*.

In what follows, I take up a sustained and careful critique of Schuonian Perennialism in its relation to Schuon's elucidation of Ibn 'Arabī. In so doing, I also offer a response to Cutsinger, who has "kindly invited [his colleagues] to bring their preferred methodology to the table and to be as critical as they wish" (2013: xvi). Rather than evaluating Schuon's socio-religious subjectivity in ethico-political terms,¹⁴ here my "preferred methodology" aims to remain at

12 Nasr has continued to extol Schuon since his death in 1998, more recently dubbing him "one of the most remarkable intellectual and spiritual luminaries of the past century" (2004: xii).

13 The accounts and supposed evidence used for the critical analyses of Schuon's discourse in relation to the scandal, however, are problematic since much of it comes from a disgruntled disciple, Mark Koslow. As Hugh Urban himself notes, "Of course, coming as they do from a former disciple, Koslow's accounts must be regarded with a certain amount of suspicion . . ." (2002: 407). Yet Urban defends his use of Koslow's reports since "it would seem . . . that there is more than enough corroborating evidence — including a huge number of photographs, texts written by present and former disciples, court documents, and other first-hand testimonies — to support most of his descriptions of the Schuon group" (2002: 407). For a summary of Koslow's claims and corroborating evidence as well as the details of the charges and terminated investigation see Urban 2002: 438–440 (Appendices A and B).

14 In his 2002 article "A Dance of Masks" — one of *the only* sustained critical analyses of Schuon besides Mark Sedgwick's critical history of Traditionalism, *Against the Modern World* — Urban interrogates the ethical validity of Schuon's discourse in comparison with

the level of discourse by analyzing practices that create political subjectivities. In other words, I focus on how the Aryanist discursive practices found within Schuon's writings *function* as strategies for authorizing authentic religious subjects — and thereby excluding Others. While such strategies are, in the words of Russell McCutcheon, “properly termed political” because they project how “human beings ought to interact with one another in a certain manner from within certain social arrangements” (1997: 34), it does not necessarily follow that all such strategies are indications of what McCutcheon has identified in the works of Mircea Eliade as a “*totalized* political program” and “a potent and explicit political manifesto” (1997: 27, 92; emphasis mine). Yet the danger inherent within arguments for a transhistorical authenticity based upon Aryan racio-spiritual typologies should be obvious — especially within a discourse that claims for itself transcendent authority.¹⁵ Thus, while I leave others to speculate on Schuon's political alliances,¹⁶ in this essay I follow McCutcheon's

the alleged antinomian practices performed by Schuon and disciples in Bloomington. Here, Urban's concern with Schuon's “personal cult” and the apparently “disturbing” complex association it presents “between esotericism and ethics” appears to divert his analysis into reducing Schuon's discourse to that of its author, whom Urban concludes to be “Janus-faced, even schizoid” (2002: 430). Yet such a reductive slide forgoes a deeper inquiry into Schuon's discourse itself — a discourse whose rules from the very beginning appear to have been quite upfront and consistent in their antinomian epistemology and cosmology. For example, see Aymard and Laude 2004: 16; Fabbri 2007: 239, 265.

- 15 As Maurice Olender notes, “The plain truth of the matter is that, in the heart of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the words Aryan and Semite became labels of life and death for millions of men, women, and children classed as one or the other” (2002: 19).
- 16 The British historian Robert Irwin has rather sardonically asserted that “Schuon . . . deplored the Allied victory in 1945 as the victory of the profane over something more ancient” (2011: 89). Yet the Perennialist author Michael Fitzgerald apologetically claims that “many Perennialists actively resisted both Fascism and Nazism during World War II” and specifically notes how Schuon “fought against the Nazis, was captured, escaped from a Nazi prison camp, and fled into Switzerland” (2004: 145, 145 n. 19). For a detailed account of Schuon's so-called “escape” — which happened after he was actually *released* by the Nazis since, as a resident of Alsace, they considered him German — see Aymard and Laude 2004: 26. For his part, Urban asserts that “Schuon's political views are strikingly similar to those of the Fascist metaphysician and representative of ‘Traditionalism,’ Julius Evola” (2002: 432 n. 10). Yet, given Schuon's almost total silence on political affairs and attendant political quietism (unlike Evola or Eliade), there is little historical evidence for such an assertion. That being said, there are definite places in Schuon's discourse that strikingly echo classic fascist motifs. The most obvious example is Schuon's 1957 monograph *Castes and Races* [*Castes et Races*], which is divided into three sections, the first two dealing with the “Meaning of Caste” and “Race” and the final with that of the “Principles and Criteria of Art.” As Roger Griffin notes, the idea of art as an expression of the soul of the people

broadier objective of understanding how scholarly works “can be informed by a particular political and social context and can carry with them sociopolitical implications” (1997: 89).

The Primacy of Metaphysics: Transcendent Universalism or Situated Exclusivism?

With the publication of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* [*De l'unité transcendante des religions*] in 1948 and the death of his “Traditionalist” predecessor René Guénon in 1951,¹⁷ Schuon promptly became “the great expositor of esoterism and the *sophia perennis* of his day . . .” (Nasr 2006: 258). As its title suggests, Schuon’s iconic treatise claims that all religious forms are unified in their transcendent, essential nature — the *religio perennis*. As Schuon states in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, this is so because “it is metaphysically impossible” that any given religious form “should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; *for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive . . .*” (Schuon 2005: 18; emphasis mine). Schuon thus attempts to explain this seemingly circular logic further:

[T]he exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of the truth comes up against the axiomatic objection that there is no such thing in existence as a unique fact, for the simple reason that *it is strictly impossible that such a fact should exist, unicity alone being unique and no fact being unicity*; it is this that is ignored by the ideology of the “believers,” which is fundamentally nothing but *an intentional and interested confusion between the formal and the universal*.

SCHUON 2005: 19; emphasis mine

was one of the few common motifs within the diverse manifestation of fascism: “For the cultural theorists of Fascism, Nazism, the British Union of Fascists, the Falange, the Iron Guard, or the AIB, whatever their stance on modernism, realism, or the celebration of rural life, art was meant to express the uncorrupted soul of the people, and made manifest the health or decadence of the entire culture” (2005: 800). In his final section on art in *Castes and Races*, Schuon thus notes that “[s]acred art represents above all the spirit, and profane art the collective soul or genius,” where the genius is “spiritual and racial . . .” (1982: 64). Thus, “[t]aken together spiritual genius and collective genius make up traditional genius which gives its imprint to the whole civilization” (Schuon 1982: 64).

- 17 The Perennialist perspective of René Guénon is commonly labeled “Traditionalist” — so named after the “primordial tradition,” which is the Guénonian equivalent of so-called perennial truth (i.e., the *philosophia perennis*, *sophia perennis*, and *religio perennis*). E.g., see Guénon 2004a: 51. See also n. 2 above.

Setting aside the apparent logical fallacy of this argument,¹⁸ what Schuon here asserts is that because the unitive reality of the divine is *alone* unique, there can thus be no other unique “facts” in creation. Therefore, normative religious creeds — that is, “the ideology of the ‘believers’” — and their exclusive truth claims are essentially partial, since the only true singularity is the ultimate truth of “unicity.” Schuon thus concludes that “pure and absolute Truth can only be found beyond all its possible expressions . . .” (2005: 20). Yet, for Schuon, the truth of “unicity” can, *in fact*, be fully expressed. Accordingly, it is only through “a doctrine that is *metaphysical* in the most precise meaning of the word” (i.e., as proceeding “*exclusively from the Intellect*”), that the “intentional and interested confusion” of normative religion is transcended and ultimate truth realized (Schuon 2005: xxix; emphasis mine). Thus, Schuon importantly asserts that “*intellectual intuition is a direct and active participation in divine Knowledge* and not an indirect and passive participation, as is faith” (2005: xxx; emphasis mine). As Cutsinger suggests above, “the Intellect” — and its attendant mode of “intellectual intuition” — emerges for Schuon as the key to “divine Knowledge,” which is thus analogous to his “metaphysical” doctrine of transcendent unity. Indeed, as Schuon would later note, “our position is well known: it is fundamentally that of *metaphysics*, and this science is by definition *universalist* . . .” (2013: xi; emphasis mine).

Schuon’s early valorization of “metaphysics” as encapsulating his universalist doctrine of “divine Knowledge” would take on added significance in a work

18 Schuon’s argument is an example of a fallacy of equivocation. It equivocates by using the term “unique” in two different senses articulated in the following syllogism: (a) “unicity alone [is] unique,” (b) “no fact [is] unicity,” therefore (c) “there is no such thing in existence as a unique fact.” Earlier in the same passage, Schuon further evinces the details of this equivocation: “a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say, it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses. Form implies specifications or distinction, and the specific is only conceivable as a modality of a ‘species,’ that is to say, of a category that includes a combination of analogous modalities” (Schuon 2005: 18). Thus, when Schuon makes the theological — *and tautological* — claim that the essence of divine “unicity” is absolutely unique, he means to say that divine truth is beyond categorization, since *by definition* it is without any limitation. Yet to claim that there is “no fact” which is unique — because facts are comparable to other “analogous modalities” — is to use the term “unique” only in relation to Platonic essences or *kinds* of things. Yet this essentialist conception of “facts” as so many universal categories disregards their uniqueness in and of themselves, i.e., as independent phenomena occurring in time and space. As such, *it does not follow* that because the divine is beyond categorical limitation there are consequently no unique facts, since in this syllogism the uniqueness of the divine specifically applies to its categorical uniqueness as absolute necessary essence, while the uniqueness of facts must *also* (and perhaps *only*) apply to their accidental uniqueness in time and space.

published nearly ten years after *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. In this 1957 monograph tellingly entitled *Castes and Races* [*Castes et Races*], Schuon asserts that “if the white race can claim a sort of pre-eminence, it can do so only through the Hindu group which in a way perpetuates the primordial state of the Indo-Europeans and, in a wider sense, that of white men as a whole” (1982: 53; emphasis mine). Schuon further notes that such a “primordial state” of the white man is preserved by the Hindus because they “surpass every other human group by their contemplativity and the metaphysical genius resulting from this . . .” (1982: 53; emphasis mine).

While the assertion of such Hindu-Indo-European-white metaphysical supremacy seems paradoxical enough given Schuon’s earlier claims in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* for the impossibility of exclusive form, it appears all the more so given the fact that when *Castes and Races* was published, more than twenty years had passed since Schuon, under the Muslim name ʿĪsa Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad al-Shādhilī al-ʿAlawī, had taken on the spiritual leadership of the European branch of the ʿAlāwīyya Sufi *ṭarīqa*, as initially noted.¹⁹ Yet the preeminence that Schuon affords the “metaphysical genius” of “the Hindu group” in terms of “the primordial state of the Indo-Europeans” in *Castes and Races* is also, albeit ironically, reflected in his racialized deprecation of Sufism. In his only work specifically dedicated to the subject, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* [*Le Soufisme: voile et quintessence*, 1980], Schuon faults “Sufi metaphysics” for being linked to the “anti-metaphysical and moralizing creationism of the monotheistic theologies,” which ultimately keep it from admitting “the principle of relativity,” that is, the transcendent unity of religions (2006d: 24; emphasis mine). “The innermost motive of Muslim mysticism” is thus, according to Schuon, “fundamentally more moral than intellectual . . . in the sense that Arab or Muslim, or Semitic, sensibility always remains more or less volitive, hence subjectivist . . .” (2006d: 28; emphasis mine).²⁰ Indeed, in the same passage Schuon asserts, “We do not believe we are over-stylizing things in taking the view that the Aryan tends to be a philosopher whereas the Semite is above all a moralist . . .” (2006d: 28; emphasis mine). As evidence of such an assertion, Schuon thus claims that one need only “compare the *Upanishads*,

19 See n. 8 above. The ʿAlāwīyya Sufi order became the ʿAlāwīyya Maryamiyya in the mid-1960s due to Schuon’s special devotion to the Virgin Mary, which is discussed more below. See Sedgwick 2004: 147, 2005: 468; Nasr 2006: 258–259, 260 n. 2.

20 Schuon uses the term “subjectivist” (*subjectiviste*) here to refer to an attitude attributable to “Semitic” ontology as passionately visceral but denying “objective” reality. For the original French, see Schuon 1980: 38. Regarding the same language in Aryanist discourse, see page 281 and n. 42 below.

the *Yoga-Vasishtha*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* with the Bible, or Hindu doctrines with Talmudic speculations” (2006d: 28).

As the few examples above evince, Schuon’s original universalist epistemology — as discursively represented through the terminology of “metaphysics,” “the Intellect,” “intellectual intuition,” and “contemplativity” — was early on directly imbricated with a so-called “Aryan” spiritual typology, including “the Hindu group,” “the Indo-Europeans,” and “white men as a whole.” Moreover, such a typology is posited as superior to an “Arab or Muslim, or Semitic, sensibility” notable for its “anti-metaphysical” characteristics such as moralism, volition, and subjectivism. Although Schuon’s esoteric basis in Hinduism and, more specifically, the Vedanta, has a specific resonance with that of his Traditionalist forerunner Guénon, it is clear that such an Aryan spiritual typology is the result of a broader array of discursive influences.²¹ The same holds true for the *fin de siècle* French occultism from which modern Perennialism sprang, such as the esotericism of the Theosophical Society.²² Indeed, in what follows, I will show how Schuon’s Aryanist discourse is founded upon the discursive practices evinced in what Léon Poliakov famously dubbed the nineteenth-century “Aryan myth” as infamously elaborated by Ernest Renan (d. 1892) and his well-known contemporaries such as Christian Lassen (d. 1876), Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (d. 1882), and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (d. 1927) (see Poliakov 1996).²³ The discursive genealogy of this particular

21 Although Guénon defended the Indian caste system in racio-spiritual terms, he dismissed the idea of an “Aryan race” as an Orientalist invention and thus “devoid of meaning” (Guénon 2004a: 51, 123). See also Guénon 2001b: 65 n. 12.

22 Sedgwick observes that one of the most important precursors to Guénonian Traditionalism — and thus later Schuonian Perennialism — was the “Vedanta-Perennialism” of the Theosophical Society (Sedgwick 2004: 40). Although the discourse of Theosophy is shot through with the racist conceptions of its nineteenth-century milieu, H. P. Blavatsky’s narrative of “anthropogenesis” and her particular conception of the Aryan race was a significant departure from the academic Aryanism of her day. Indeed, Blavatsky specifically distinguished herself from “Max Müller and the other Aryanists” (1947: 425). See Kidd 2006: 244. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Blavatsky’s work directly influenced the metaphysical views of the Austrian mystagogue Guido von List (d. 1919) and his subsequent Aryanist esotericism known as Armanism. List’s ideas were further developed by Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (d. 1954) and popularized in his Aryan supremacist journal *Ostara*, which most probably played a role in the development of Hitler’s anti-Semitic ideology. See Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 52–54, 192–200.

23 Although Schuon refers to Gobineau and Chamberlain as “certain racists” in one of his essays, the characterization of “racist” is not an attack on racial typology itself but only on its metaphysical limitations. Thus, Schuon specifically takes Gobineau and Chamberlain

racialist knowledge regime can be traced to the nascent nationalism of German Romanticism and Friedrich Schlegel's (d. 1829) ethnocentric identification with ancient India.²⁴ Although it is clear that German Romantic literature, and Orientalism more broadly, had an enduring impact upon Schuon's intellectual identity, it is not my intention to claim the direct influence of any one author or text upon his thought.²⁵ Rather, in what follows, I demonstrate how Schuon uses a *particular set* of discursive practices developed within nineteenth-century Aryanism that ideologically frames his construction of "pure" esotericism and thus Ibn 'Arabī's delimited place within it.

Schuonian Discursivity and the Nineteenth-Century Aryan Myth

Although the term "Aryan" — from the Sanskrit *ārya*, meaning "noble" — was originally self-referentially employed by ancient Sanskrit and Persian speakers, at the start of the nineteenth century European philologists began to use the term to refer to the Indo-European language group. By the middle

to task for being unaware of the fact that "each race repetition of certain types" is due not simply "to mixtures" of bloodline, but to the repetition of "typological possibilities" consisting of "astrological types, the universality of the temperaments, and other factors..." (1990: 46). Yet, in the same work, Schuon notes, "*If the mixture between races too different from each other is to be avoided, it is precisely because this disparity generally has a consequence that the individual possesses two centers, which means practically speaking that he has none; in other words that he has no identity*" (1990: 7; emphasis mine). Here, it is clear that Schuon not only found racial typologies theoretically useful, but that he understood biological race itself to be representative of ontological "identity" as "center."

- 24 As Poliakov notes, it was Schlegel who first gave the discipline of comparative philology "an anthropological twist by deducing from the relationship of language a relationship of race" (1996: 190).
- 25 Born and raised in Switzerland within a family of Germanic origin, Schuon self-identified as a "South German" who was, in his own words, "*deeply rooted in poetic and mystical romanticism — having grown up with the German fairy-tale and German song...*" (Schuon 1995: 2; emphasis mine). For a longer quotation of this letter, see Houman 2014: 192 n. 461. While Aymard and Laude note that the young Schuon read "Goethe and Schiller, then later Heine" (2004: 7), it is open to speculation how much the neo-Romantic movement of *völkisch* mysticism may have influenced Schuon's Aryanist discursive formations. Indeed, a romantic nostalgia for an idyllic medieval past found within German folklore and folk songs was formative for the *völkisch* movement and later the Third Reich. As George Mosse notes, "the fairy tale, so the Nazi Party held, can show us the constant component of the Volk, its idealism and will to survive" (1980: 77). See also Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 3, 30, 34, 36, 44, 66–77; Mosse 1964: 16.

of the century, “Aryan” had come to signify a particular race in opposition to its “Semitic” Other (Masuzawa 2005: 151–152; Mosse 1978: 42). This process of semantic transmogrification was greatly aided by the Romantic philology of Schlegel, who, at the turn of the century, hypothesized (erroneously) that Greek, German, Persian, and Latin originated from Sanskrit (1900: 428–429). Moreover, Schlegel asserted that cultural history was best perceived through a “metaphysical interpretation” of the grammatical structure of language itself, claiming Sanskrit to be “*almost entirely a philosophical or rather a religious language* and perhaps none, not even excepting the Greek, *is so philosophically clear and sharply defined . . .*” (Schlegel 1900: 457; emphasis mine). Rather predictably, Schlegel thus adds: “We find nothing in Arabic, or Hebrew, agreeing with the Indian grammar . . .” (1900: 462). Thus, as George Mosse trenchantly notes, Schlegel “set down the maxims of an Aryan superiority exemplified by linguistic roots” (1978: 41).

At mid-century, Schlegel’s incipient Aryanism would emerge fully formed in Gobineau’s infamous *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* [*Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*, 1853–1855]. Thus, Gobineau states,

The *superabundance of philosophical and ethnological terms* in Sanscrit corresponds to the genius of those who spoke it as well as its richness and rhythmic beauty. *The same is the case with Greek while the lack of precision in the Semitic tongues is exactly paralleled by the character of the Semitic peoples.*

GOBINEAU 1915: 189; emphasis mine

Renan would further theorize the relationship between language and race by asserting the existence of “linguistic races” and argue that in the later development of humanity “*language took almost entirely the place of race in the division of humanity into groups*; or, to put it in another way, the word ‘race’ assumed a different meaning. *Language, religion, laws, and customs came to constitute the race far more than blood*” (1904: 242, 1905: 3; emphasis mine). Indeed, it was through such claims of an inherent linkage between language, race, and religion that Renan could famously reassert the superiority of the Aryan intellect, which “differed essentially” from the Semitic and thus “*contained in the germ all the metaphysics* which were afterwards to be developed through the Hindoo genius, the Greek genius, the German genius” (1905: 7–8; emphasis mine). For Renan, the particular “genius” of the Aryan spirit is its metaphysical “search for the truth,” while the inadequacy of the “Semitic spirit” is precisely its incapacity for metaphysics, which manifests in a “fearful shallowness” that closes the Semitic mind “to all subtle ideas” (quoted in Poliakov 1996: 208).

In his above-mentioned work *Castes and Races*, Schuon affirms the category of “race” as infused with higher spiritual significance beyond physiology:

It is not possible . . . to hold that race is something devoid of meaning apart from physical characteristics, for, if it be true that formal constraints have nothing absolute about them, forms must none the less have their own sufficient reason; if races are not castes, they must all the same correspond to human differences of another order, rather as differences of style may express equivalence in the spiritual order whilst also marking divergencies of mode.

SCHUON 1982: 37; emphasis mine²⁶

Moreover, Schuon recapitulates the Renanian notion of “linguistic races,” stating that the Semites and Aryans constitute not only a “linguistic group,” but also “a psychological group and *even a racial group* . . .” (2006d: 20; emphasis mine). Schuon also echoes Renan’s contentions of a superior Aryan spirit in the quest for “truth” in opposition to the Semitic spirit that veils it. “It is perhaps not too hazardous to say,” Schuon ventures, “that *the Aryan spirit . . . tends a priori to unveil the truth* whereas *the Semitic spirit*, whose realism is more moral than intellectual, *tends toward the veiling of the divine Majesty* . . .” (2006d: 26; emphasis mine).

The idea of the metaphysical superiority of the so-called Aryan spirit in relation to Hinduism — or more esoterically conceived as “the Vedanta”²⁷ — formed a large part of the Romantic fascination with India. A key German influence for Renan and his contemporaries in this respect was the work of Schlegel’s successor, the Indologist Christian Lassen, whose conception of Aryan philosophical supremacy over that of the Semite linked the highest mode of Aryanism with the *whitest* castes of India (Poliakov 1996: 197). Chamberlain, the notorious “seer of the Third Reich” (Stackelberg 2005: 113),²⁸

26 See also n. 23 above.

27 I.e., the *Upanishads*, the ultimate teaching of the Veda. The reduction of Hinduism to the Vedanta was in large part due to the popularity of A. H. Anquetil-Duperron’s Latin translation of the *Oupnek’hat* (sections of the *Upanishads* taken from Dara Shukoh’s Persian translation) at the turn of the nineteenth century. For more on the *Oupnek’hat*’s influence on Western conceptions of Hinduism, see King 2002: 119–120. In European Romantic usage, “Vedanta” became synonymous with *Advaita Vedānta*, the non-dualistic philosophy developed and popularized by the Indian philosopher Shankara (d. 820) (Clarke 1997: 56, 229 n. 3).

28 Chamberlain’s 1899 work *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* [*Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*] became “the Bible” of racial truth for the *völkisch* movement

would note that Lassen “proves in detail his view that the Indo-European race is ‘more highly and more fully gifted,’ that in it alone there is ‘perfect symmetry of all mental powers’” (1968, 1:338 n. †). Thus, Chamberlain asserts that “[t]he Aryan Indian . . . unquestionably possesses the greatest talent for metaphysics of any people that ever lived . . .” and that the thought of “the Hindoo” is “*metaphysically the deepest in the world*” (1968, 1:6, 435; emphasis mine). Chamberlain further claims, “The most perfect expression of absolutely mystical religion is found among the Aryan Indians . . .” (1968, 2:411).

In a strikingly similar avowal, Schuon states, “The most direct doctrinal expression of the *sophia perennis* is undoubtedly *Advaita Vedānta* . . .” (2007b: 244). Indeed, the Indian Veda is for Schuon a superior scriptural form that “does not give orders to the intelligence,” like the “enslaving” revelation of the Semites, “but awakens it and reminds it of what it is” (2006d: 21). Thus, for the Aryan, according to Schuon, “[i]ntellectual certainty has priority here *over a submissive faith*” (2006d: 21; emphasis mine). Yet, more importantly, the Aryan “tendency to intellection” is not simply determined externally by the epistemological nature of the Vedic scriptural tradition, since in Schuon’s understanding “what determines the difference among forms of Truth *is the difference among human receptacles*” (2006a: 17; emphasis mine). Rather, according to Schuon, the different “mental conditions” of each racial “group”²⁹ self-determine the “refraction” of Truth of their particular revelation (2006a: 17). Indeed, in *Castes and Races*, Schuon directly states, “[A] *revelation always conforms to a racial genius* . . .” (1982: 42 n. 30; emphasis mine). Thus, while both Aryan “intellectionism” and Semitic “inspirationism” are, according to Schuon, “sacred,” Semitic inspirationism is “derived from a particular grace *and not, like intellection, from a permanent and ‘naturally supernatural’ capacity*” (2006d: 27–28; emphasis mine).

Such Aryan “‘naturally supernatural’ capacity” is further elaborated in Schuon’s appropriation of the Hindu term “avatar.” Like Renan, Schuon repeatedly uses the idea of the avatar as a synonym for prophet (e.g., Schuon 2007a: 118; Renan 1858: 8, 1864: 64). While Renan suggests subtle distinctions between

in Germany and served as an important intellectual and ideological precursor for the theorists of the Third Reich (Mosse 1964: 97). E.g., Alfred Rosenberg’s *Foundations of the Twentieth Century*. See Jackson and Weidman 2004: 124. See also Poliakov 1996: 318 20.

29 Schuon qualifies that the division of humanity into different “branches” is “not always a question of race, but more often of human groups . . . subject to mental conditions which . . . make of them sufficiently homogeneous spiritual recipients” (2006a: 17). Thus, Schuon precisely follows the above Renanian notion of “linguistic races” and “the division of humanity into groups” (Renan 1904: 242, 1905: 3).

avatar and prophet, noting that while the avatar is a divine incarnation, the prophet is a chosen instrument of revelation (1858: 8), Schuon categorizes such difference as “major and minor *Avatāras*, complete and partial incarnations” respectively. Schuon goes on importantly to clarify the difference between the two through a comparison between Jesus and Muhammad: “Christ, who *identifies the divine Message with himself*, belongs to the first of these two categories whereas the Prophet, who *passively receives* the Message that God ‘causes to descend,’ belongs to the second...” (2008: 71; emphasis mine). In other words, Aryan “intellection” as a “‘naturally supernatural’ capacity” is in accordance with the “major” Avatara, whom Christ embodies as a divine manifestation, whereas Semitic inspirationism as a *passive influx* of grace accords with Schuon’s notion of “minor” Avatara and the Arab Prophet (2006d: 28). Such distinctions crucially revolve around the notion that the “genius” of the Semitic race is dissociated from the “Semitic spirit” itself. As Maurice Olender notes in the context of Renanian discourse, “Although the Hebrew did indeed recognize that God is one, that truth descended upon him: he had no responsibility in the matter. *His monotheism was in no sense a product of his mind*” (2002: 66; emphasis mine).

Elsewhere, Schuon further elucidates the distinction between Muhammad and Christ in Aryanist terms:

Since it was not necessary for Muhammad to present himself — any more than Abraham and Moses — as the Manifestation of the Absolute, he could, like them, remain *wholly Semitic in style*, a style which attaches itself meticulously to human things, not scanting even the smallest; *whereas in Christ* — paradoxically and providentially — *there is an element that brings him closer to the Aryan world*, that is, *a tendency in his nature toward the idealistic simplification of earthly contingencies*.

SCHUON 2002: 24; emphasis mine

Here, Schuon’s classification of Muhammad’s “Semitic” style posits a mentality that is attached “meticulously to human things” in opposition to Christ’s “Aryan” tendency towards a Platonic “idealism,” namely, a metaphysical realm that transcends the human world of material reality (see Grøn 2003: 446). Such a comparison between the Semitic, “worldly” Muhammad and the Aryan, “formless” Christ is once again a forceful reiteration of an Aryanist conceit deprecating a Semitic “materialism” notable for its voluntarism, ritualism, and lack of metaphysics. As Chamberlain succinctly states, “Pure materialism is the religious doctrine of the Arab Mohammed...” (1968, 1:420). Indeed, after apologizing for what may strike the reader as “ill-sounding,” Schuon clarifies in

a footnote that “we shall say that Christ, who was destined to be an ‘Aryan god,’ has himself, by way of anticipation, *a certain Aryan quality*, which shows itself *in his independence — seemingly ‘Greek’ or ‘Hindu’ — toward forms . . .*” (2002: 24 n. 19; emphasis mine). Schuon elsewhere maintains that the language of Christianity is “*on the whole more ‘Aryan’ than that of Moslem piety, hence more direct and more open . . .*” (1986a: 176; emphasis mine).

Schuon’s perception of Christianity as more or less “Aryan” is again — like much of his comparative religionist discourse — an iteration of a nineteenth-century Aryanist conceit. The idea that Jesus was an Aryan and not a Jew became popular around the turn of the twentieth century and was ultimately adopted in Germany by National Socialists who wished to appear congruent with Christianity (Arvidsson 2006: 117). Renan’s ideas proved once again to be formative in this arena with his controversial work *The Life of Jesus* [*Vie de Jésus*, 1863], which, in the words of Olender, “saved Jesus from Judaism” (2002: 71). Indeed, Renan situated Jesus’ true home in Galilee, whose “free life” was “like perfume from another world . . .” (1864: 141). Conversely, Jerusalem as representative of Judea was a city of “littleness of mind” and “*contributed in no respect to refine the intellect.*” “It was,” according to Renan, “something analogous to *the barren doctrine of the Mussulman fakir . . .*” (1864: 159; emphasis mine).

Following Renan, Chamberlain’s section titled “Christ not a Jew” in his infamous anti-Semitic work *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*³⁰ begins with the claim that Jesus’ “advent is not the perfecting of the Jewish religion but its negation” (1968, 1:221). Chamberlain thus asserts that the “formalism” of the Jews “choked” the “genuine religion” that Jesus opened up (1968, 1:221). Thus, Chamberlain inquires, “where is the people, which, awakened by Christ to life, has gained for itself the precious right of calling Christ its own? *Certainly not in Judea!*” (1968, 1:202; emphasis mine). Unsurprisingly, Chamberlain transposes the lineage of Jesus’ religion from Semitic Judea to Aryan India and the Vedanta (1968, 2:411). In this, too, he follows Renan’s lead, who saw in Christ’s predecessor, John the Baptist, the “life of a Yogi of India,” which was “so opposed to the spirit of the ancient Jewish people” that it more resembled the “*gourous of Brahminism*” (1864: 94, 95). For his part, Schuon precisely recapitulates the sentiments above, situating Jesus’ proper spiritual place in India rather than Judea, noting that

Jesus has the function of a regenerator: he is the great prophet of inwardness, and as such he should have been accepted by Israel as Isaiah was;

30 See n. 28 above.

however, *this acceptance presupposed a spiritual suppleness more fitting of India than Judea.*

SCHUON 2002: 228; emphasis mine

Ibn ‘Arabī and the Schuonian Imperative of Esoteric “Objectivity”

Regardless of their personal attachment to Jesus, it is clear that Renan’s and Chamberlain’s Aryan appropriation of him was necessary for their message to be accepted within their respective Christian milieus. Likewise, Schuon could not afford to ignore Ibn ‘Arabī’s importance within Guénonian Traditionalism. While Guénon identified the “primordial tradition” directly with Vedānta,³¹ which Schuon enthusiastically commended him for,³² he *also* acknowledged that Ibn ‘Arabī expressed such truth “in almost identical terms . . .” but in a way consonant with “Judaism [as] . . . nothing but a particular way of expressing the idea of universal manifestation and its relation with the Principle” (2004b: 38 n. 12).³³ Indeed, Guénon’s first encounter with Islam was through the metaphysical hermeneutics of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought via the interpretation of Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) — the well-known Swedish painter, anarchist, and esotericist. Aguéli was initiated as “Abdul-Hadi” into a branch of the Shādhiliyya Sufi order by ‘Abd al-Rahmān ‘Illaysh,³⁴ who was for a time an associate of Amir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1883) in Damascus. Famous as the leader of the resistance against the French occupation of Algeria, ‘Abd al-Qādir “proved to be the most influential interpreter of Ibn ‘Arabī in his time” (Weismann 2001: 6). Not only did Aguéli have a direct influence upon Guénon as his initiator into ‘Illaysh’s Sufi order,³⁵ but, as Mark Sedgwick notes, “[t]he real significance of

31 Guénon claimed that the *Sanātana Dharma* was the only “fully integral” tradition, i.e., the “primordial tradition” (2001a: 81–82). For the Guénonian idea of “primordial tradition,” see n. 17 above.

32 In an article originally published in 1985, Schuon states that “Guénon was entirely right in specifying that *Vedānta* is the most direct and, in a certain respect, the most assimilable expression of pure metaphysics; no attachment to any non-Hindu tradition obliges us not to know this, or to pretend not to know it” (2004a: 8).

33 Here, it should be noted that Guénon bases this opinion upon *Risālat al-aḥadiyya*, a work by Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī (d. 1287) but frequently attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī. For a thorough treatment of the doctrinal differences and historical consequences of the misattribution of Balyānī’s text, see Chodkiewicz 1982.

34 I.e., the ‘Arabiyya Shādhiliyya (or Shādhiliyya ‘Arabiyya); see Hatina 2007: 390.

35 Indeed, it was Aguéli who wrongly attributed the above-mentioned *Risālat al-aḥadiyya* to Ibn ‘Arabī (see n. 33 above). Guénon was introduced to this work through Aguéli’s

this encounter was the transfer into Traditionalism of the central position taken by Ibn al-Arabi in Damascus" (2011: 183 n. 4; emphasis mine).

Thus, in the Traditionalist milieu, Ibn 'Arabī's thought is commonly taken to be, as noted by the distinguished Arabist and Perennialist Martin Lings (d. 2005), "basically identical with the Sufi perspective in general..." (Lings 1978: xiii). In the light of such renown, Schuon seemingly has little choice but to acknowledge Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics in the highest terms, identifying him as "the great enunciator of gnosis in Islam" and even as a direct expression of none other than the *religio perennis* itself (1998: 37, 2006b: 120). Yet Schuon also takes Ibn 'Arabī to task for "divergent interpretations — one esoteric and the other exoteric..." and elsewhere disparages the "unevenness and contradictions" in his thought "owing above all to his at least partial solidarity with ordinary theology..." (2009: 125, 2006d: 33).

For example, when discussing Ibn 'Arabī's elevation of Muhammad's rank over that of Joseph in *The Ring Stones of Wisdom* [*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*],³⁶ Schuon asserts, "[O]ne has a right to expect a more nuanced and *objective perspective* in an esoteric context" (2006d: 45; emphasis mine). Similarly, Ibn 'Arabī's auto-exegetical statement that his "religion of love is the prerogative of Muslims; for the station of the most perfect love has been imparted exclusively to the Prophet Muhammad and not the other Prophets" is derided by Schuon as an "*abrupt and unintelligible denominationalism*" (2006d: 40 n. 29).³⁷ Schuon thus protests that "one might expect an esoterist not to enclose himself in this concept-symbol but, since he has opted for the essence, *to take into account the relativity of forms*... and to *do so in an objective and concrete*, and not merely metaphorical, manner — or else remain silent, for pity's sake" (2006d: 40 n. 29; emphasis mine).

Such corrective reprimands not only evince an exasperation with Ibn 'Arabī's recourse to Islamic normativity, but also, and more importantly, a perceived infringement of a supposed esoteric axiom — that is, the "objective" truth of "the relativity of forms." In order to explain such a shocking transgression by a metaphysician who should know better, Schuon further asserts that "[o]ne is obliged, however, to take note of the *de facto* existence of two esoterisms, one partially formalistic and the other perfectly consistent, all the

translation, which was originally published in three parts in *La Gnose* magazine in 1911. See Abdul-Hādī 1988: 107–133.

36 See Ibn al-'Arabī 1966: 101.

37 Ibn 'Arabī quoted in Schuon 2006d: 40 n. 29; see Ibn al-'Arabī 1978: 69. See also Ibn al-'Arabī 2005: 50–51.

more so as facts cannot always be at the level of principles" (2006d: 40 n. 29).³⁸ Schuon elucidates this idea elsewhere in an essay appropriately entitled "Two Esoterisms" (1986a: 115–122). In explicating its first sense, Schuon employs esotericism in opposition to its binary "exotericism." Here, esoteric truth is a "non-formal and *metaphysical*" mode of "*intellection*" that originates from the very "*nature of things*" and is opposed to the "formal and theological truth" of "Revelation," which is by implication "legalistic or obligatory truth" (Schuon 1986a: 115; emphasis mine).

Schuon's second definition of esotericism further reifies the concept, giving it a unique autonomy decoupled from any relationship to its exoteric Other. Here, esotericism "is not, in its intrinsic reality, a complement or a half" (1986a: 15). Rather, for Schuon, "esoterism *as such* is *metaphysics*"; indeed, it is "the *total truth* as such" (1986a: 115; emphasis mine). As "the total truth," this pure form of esotericism is inherently different than an "esoterism of a particular religion," which "tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological, and legalistic meanders *foreign to its nature . . .*" (Schuon 1986a: 115; emphasis mine).

While Vedanta is for Schuon "an intrinsic esoterism" (Schuon 1986a: 118), Sufism is an "esotericism-complement" because its doctrine seeks "to combine two tendencies, Platonism and Asharism" (2006d: 31). Here, Platonism, like Vedanta, is an example of "true metaphysics" where "the true, the beautiful, and the good are such because they manifest qualities proper to the Principle, or to the Essence . . ." (Schuon 2006d: 31). Yet in the path of Sufism, Platonism is combined with the "ordinary" theological tradition of Ash'arism, which, according to Schuon is not only voluntaristic, but also "viscerally moralistic and therefore individualistic . . ." (2006d: 31).³⁹ Thus, Schuon asserts that

38 Schuon's opposition of "facts" against "principles" here refers to a syllogism first made in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* regarding the impossibility of any "fact" in the world (i.e., any exoteric religious perspective) correctly enunciating God's uniqueness. As shown in n. 18 above, however, the syllogism itself is flawed.

39 Schuon repeatedly denigrates Semitic Ash'arism as "individualistic," which is analogous to his similarly stated accusation of "subjectivist" (see n. 20 above). Elsewhere, Schuon categorizes such "ordinary" theology as "the general style of Islam as a Semitic monotheism," which he similarly defines as "the style of a voluntarist and emotional individualism" (2009: 112). Here, he nevertheless praises the Arab Sufi al-Niffarī (d. 977), who as "a pure adept of *gnosis*" was able to effectively transcend such Semitic "style" (Schuon 2009: 112 n. 14). Similarly elsewhere, Schuon commends the Arab Sufi Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh (d. 1309) for mixing "the spirit of the Psalms with that of the *Upanishads*" (2006d: 19) — yet another way Schuon authorizes an Arab Sufi to transcend an otherwise Semitic mentality through recourse to Vedanta.

"Sufism obviously approaches pure *gnosis* to the extent it is Platonic . . . and it departs from it to the extent it capitulates to Asharism" (2006d: 31). Schuon concludes this discussion by pointing out how the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which as noted above is traditionally associated with Ibn 'Arabī, is tainted with an Ash'arī voluntarism since in it "everything that exists is 'good' because it is 'willed by God'" (2006d: 31). Schuon thus asserts, "Here the most vertiginous metaphysics is combined with the most summary Asharism" (2006d: 31). Elsewhere, Schuon directly equates Ibn 'Arabī's related occasionalism to "the Hanbalite and Asharite negation of secondary causes and natural laws" (2009: 124).⁴⁰ Here, Schuon reproaches Ibn 'Arabī for both a "confused" hermeneutic — which is "*independent of every question of dialectic*" combining esoteric and exoteric interpretations — and an excessive fideism resulting from his monistic absorption (2009: 124–125, 125 n. 29; emphasis mine).⁴¹

Schuon's reductive portrayal of Ash'arī voluntarism and occasionalism thus serves throughout his work as symbolic of a wider typology where "the negation of secondary causes and natural laws that is characteristic of Asharism" is a trait common to "*all Semitic theologians*" (2008: 150–151; emphasis mine). As such, it should not be surprising that the reason Platonism is contrary to Ash'arism in this respect is because, according to Schuon, Plato "*belonged intellectually to the Aryan world, and his doctrine is like a distant modality of Brahmanism . . .*" (2009: 78). According to Schuon, this Aryan-Vedantist typology facilitated in Plato "the actualization of pure intellection" as opposed to the fideism of al-Ash'arī (2009: 78). Indeed, elsewhere Schuon clarifies that this difference is due to an *inherent* Aryan capacity for metaphysical inquiry — that is, "dialectic" — and thus "objectivity":

Greeks and especially Hindus have long possessed the instrument of dialectic, for it corresponds to their sense of objectivity, whereas *it was missing among the early Semites, as well as for nascent Islam . . .*

SCHUON 2002: 210; emphasis mine

In another work Schuon similarly notes that "the reasoning of Semites" is based merely upon a "dogmatic" certitude and a wish to "communicate and reinforce what is evident," thus opposing "Greeks and Hindus" whose mode of reasoning is "*a dialectic that is concerned with doing justice to the nature of*

40 Indeed, Schuon claims that "it is from Hanbalism that Asharite *kalām* inherited its most questionable theses" (2008: 164).

41 It should be noted here that Ibn 'Arabī himself was critical of voluntarism. See Ibn al-'Arabī 1966: 67.

things" (2008: 165; emphasis mine). Here, Schuon invokes an intellectualist discourse similar to the Stoic philosophy of "natural law" as marked by the notion that the intrinsic rationality of the universe — that is, "the nature of things" — is a reflection of divine reason, or *logos*, and accessible to humans through their higher intellect (see Hopkins 2006: 507). Schuon thus concludes that "the weakness of certain arguments of Sufis themselves" is explained by a supposed Semitic lack of objectivity, since Semitic logic "is not impartial and has ceased to be anything more than an extrinsic factor" (2008: 165).

Unsurprisingly, Schuon's opposition to Semitic voluntarism through an intellectualist appeal to "natural law" aligned with Hindu and Greek thought is similarly found in Chamberlain, who asserts that "while the Indian taught the negation of will, . . . *religion is for the Semite the idolization of his will . . .*" (1968, 1:419; emphasis mine). In another passage, Chamberlain opposes both Islamic and Jewish voluntarism by identifying the "Indo-European" with the law of "nature":

The abnormally developed will of the Semites can lead to two extremes: either to rigidity, as in the case of Mohammed, where the idea of the unlimited divine caprice is predominant; or, as is the case with the Jews, to the phenomenal elasticity, which is produced by the conception of their own human arbitrariness. To the Indo-European both paths are closed. In nature he observes everywhere the rule of law . . .

CHAMBERLAIN 1968, 1:242–243; emphasis mine

Indeed, the oft-repeated dichotomy in Schuon's writings between a purported Aryan philosophical "objectivity" against a moralistic, "subjective," Semitic Other vividly echoes the discourse of Lassen, Renan, and Chamberlain, where the supposed "subjective" sentimentality of the Semitic mentality does not have the necessary self-distance to experience higher forms of poetic and philosophical thought.⁴² Thus, according to Chamberlain, "religion" for the Aryan has nothing to do with "morals"; rather, "*he is thinker and poet . . .*" (1968, 1:215; emphasis mine). In *Castes and Races*, Schuon echoes Chamberlain precisely, stating that "*the white man is essentially a poet . . .*" (1982: 43; emphasis mine).

42 For Lassen, the worldview of the Semite "is subjective and egotistical" (Lassen quoted in Arvidsson 2006: 94). According to Lassen, such extreme subjectivity and egotism had made Semitic religiosity intolerant and exclusivist. Moreover, Semites are so overcome with passion and emotion that they cannot appreciate the higher arts such as sculpture or painting like the Indo-Germans. See Arvidsson 2006: 94.

Following Gobineau's tripartite racial typology,⁴³ Schuon continues: "As for the black man, he is neither a cerebral type nor a visualizer but vital, and so a born dancer; he is profoundly vital as the yellow man is delicately visual, *both races being existential rather than mental as compared to the white race*" (1982: 43; emphasis mine).

Schuon elsewhere claims that while "Platonists and Vedantists" are concerned with "a metaphysical description of the Real," the "Semites, on the other hand, *stress a subjective way of attaining what is*; the Real is enclosed in a dogma . . ." (2009: 128; emphasis mine). Similarly, in *Sufism*, Schuon states that "Aryans are objectivists . . . while Semites are subjectivists . . . It is the difference between intellectualism and voluntarism . . ." (2006d: 21). In such terms, Schuon makes the following ontological claim: "The *prerogative of the human state is objectivity* . . ." (2003: 60; emphasis mine). "Objectivity is *none other than the truth*," furthers Schuon, "in which the subject and the object coincide, and in which *the essential takes precedence over the accidental* . . ." (2003: 60; emphasis mine). It is thus unmistakable that "objectivity" for Schuon is analogous to his above notion of "esoterism" as "*the total truth as such*" — both concepts accordingly fall within the special province of the Aryan, who, as was noted above, not only possesses a unique "'naturally supernatural' capacity" for "intellection," but also represents the most complete expression of "the human state."

De-Semitizing Ibn 'Arabī: Finding Vedanta through the Naked Virgin

As has already been shown, for Schuon the primary problem with so-called Semitic subjectivism is its inability to distinguish the underlying formlessness of the Real from the contingent dogmas presented by the various religions. Like his Aryanist predecessors, Schuon linked this Semitic "confusion" with the inherent nature of monotheistic "inspirationism," which was incapable of the higher-order, metaphysical insight necessary for objective knowledge. Indeed, as was noted at the onset, this was precisely his critique of Sufism, which he claimed is linked to the "*anti-metaphysical and moralizing creationism* of the

43 In *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, Gobineau famously posits the division of humanity into three immutable but unequal races of "the black, the yellow, and the white" (1915: 205). Elsewhere, Schuon states, "There are three great racial types, the white, the yellow, and the black . . ." (1990: 44).

monotheistic theologies,” thus keeping it from sufficiently acknowledging “*the principle of relativity*” (Schuon 2006d: 24; emphasis mine).

Although Schuon repeatedly asserted the importance of maintaining “traditional” religious form, it seems that he did so only as a formal means to legitimize its transcendence. As Schuon states in a 1983 letter,

A condition of the legitimacy of a spiritual school or community is the presence of the traditional form; in our case, Islam. Nevertheless, the more conscious one is of the supra formal nature of spiritual Truth and Reality, the more conscious one must be also of the *relativity of the traditional form*; and according to the spatial or temporal circumstances, *one must in one fashion or another manifest this consciousness*.

SCHUON 1995: 10; emphasis mine

In an earlier letter, Schuon appears to have theorized his above call to “manifest” the “consciousness” of the relativity of formal religion as “a moving away from the *Religio formalis* by virtue of a moving towards the *Religio perennis* . . .” (1995: 2). Here, Schuon importantly explains that the “*Religio perennis* is the body,” while “the *Religio formalis* is the garment . . .” (1995: 2). Thus, while Schuon admits that Islam forms “the providential ground” for his *ṭarīqa*, he specifies that “the goal” of “the work” is “not the Islamic form as such, but precisely esoterism, and from this it follows that our *Tarīqah* as [a] vehicle of esoterism could not simply be absorbed in the Islamic form” (1995: 2).

In the same letter, Schuon relates that the “Holy Virgin in a new form, corresponding directly to esoterism . . .” came to him as part of an answer to his early search for “how esoterism as such could manifest and assert itself anew . . .” (1995: 2). Indeed, Schuon changed the name of his *ṭarīqa* to the ‘Alāwīyya Maryamiyya in the mid-1960s in response to repeated experiences and visions of the Virgin Mary, which marked a transition to the mature stage of Schuon’s esoteric theory and the exposition of the *religio perennis* (see Aymard and Laude 2004: 76). Schuon thus understood “the domain of Mary, the Virgin Mother,” to be on a level where separate religious “systems as such lose much of their importance and where by way of compensation the essential elements they have in common are affirmed, elements which, whether one likes it or not, give the systems all their value . . .” (2008: 87–88). This “new form” of the Virgin is, according to Schuon, “a form that in a certain way *includes India in it* and at the same time belongs to the proto-Semitic world; *which thus rises above all theological and liturgical particularization*” (1995: 2; emphasis mine). Thus, Schuon often equates the Virgin with the “incarnation of divine Femininity” (2004b: 137) and its Hindu manifestation, the “Supreme *Shakti*” (2002: 118),

which precedes all forms and “overflows upon them all, embraces them all, and reintegrates them all” (2008: 88).

In extending the metaphysical association of the “new form” of the Virgin to include India and Hinduism, Schuon brings Mary into discursive alignment with his self-identification as “the messenger” of a new esoteric *ṭarīqa*. In a letter written in 1980, Schuon speaks of himself in the third person and claims that he is “[t]he human instrument for the manifestation of the *Religio perennis* at the end of time...” further noting that “the messenger who brought the *Tarīqah* to Europe... is more a proto-Aryan than a European...” (1995: 2). Indeed, Schuon goes on to emphasize that he is “above all a proto-Aryan and through this deeply rooted in the Hindu spirit, since indeed it has in a certain way kept alive the proto-Aryan spirit” (1995: 3).⁴⁴ In another letter written the following year, Schuon further explains the characteristics of his “Aryanism”:

[I]n my letter... *I mentioned my Aryanism*; this becomes clearer when one considers that it is *the following characteristics which make up Aryanism*: a sense for the plurality of the Divine Hypostases and for their relative autonomy; a sense for the holiness or for the divinity, so to speak, of Nature, hence the reverencing of Nature, be it the veneration of forests, mountains, or streams, or the worship of the sun; then a sense for the divinity of the whole universe, and consequently “pantheism” so-called or “immanentism” — not in the modern philosophical sense, of course — and with it, all-embracing esoterism and the mystery cults; then too — and this properly belongs under the heading of “polytheism” — the cult of Divine Femininity; and lastly the fine arts, namely, the representation of living creatures and consequently the worship of images. All this has been preserved in the highest degree in the Hindu civilization...

SCHUON 1995: 4; emphasis mine

Tellingly, Schuon’s list of Aryan “characteristics” in this passage draws upon explicit nineteenth-century Aryanist conceits regarding what “proto-Aryans” were thought to have believed.⁴⁵ Moreover, the direct link made by Schuon

44 For a longer quotation of this letter, see Houman 2014: 192 n. 461.

45 As Stefan Arvidsson notes, “Out of romanticism’s passion for India, and out of the knowledge of the Indo-European languages, a paradigm developed in the mid-nineteenth century that provided the framework for historical research about Indo-European religion... The Indo-European sources were thought to show that Indo-Europeans or Proto-Indo-Europeans perceived God in nature, or that they chose natural phenomena as

here between “the cult of Divine Femininity,” “the fine arts,” “the worship of images,” and “Hindu civilization” is not fortuitous.

Indeed, as part of Schuon’s new spiritual relationship with the Virgin Mary, he began to paint her partially or totally naked.⁴⁶ Schuon related these images of the Virgin to Hinduism: “In my paintings of the Virgin a tendency towards Hinduism, towards Shaktism if you will, manifests itself . . .” (1995: 7). Moreover, Schuon theorized this distinctive genre as “sacred nudity,” which he equated with “a return to the essence” as he states in an interview: “It is said, in India, that nudity favors the irradiation of spiritual influences . . . In an altogether general way, nudity expresses — and virtually actualizes — a return to the essence, the origin, the archetype, thus to the celestial state . . .” (quoted in Oldmeadow 2010: 190).⁴⁷ Thus, returning to the letter above in which Schuon notes that the new esoteric form of the Holy Virgin “*includes India*,” he continues:

And here we touch once again upon *the mystery of sacred nudity; for dress is form, or particularity*, at least in the respect considered here. If the protecting mantle is an essential component of the Holy Virgin, then this holds true for her long, down-streaming hair as well, for this is her natural mantle.

SCHUON 1995: 2; emphasis mine

symbols for God. The sun, the morning, lightning, and clear sky were favorites, according to scholars” (2006: 122).

46 For a selection of Schuon’s naked Virgin paintings, see Schuon 1992: 231–277. This collection is divided into the following sections: “Red Indian World,” “Miscellaneous,” “Yogini and Devi,” and “Celestial Virgin.” Although many of the paintings in this volume are of entirely naked women whose pubic regions have been fully depilated, all of the “Celestial Virgin” images are partially naked, displaying the Virgin’s breasts only. For an example of a fully naked Virgin by Schuon (also without pubic hair), see Koslow 2008.

47 It is worth noting that a similar esoteric sentiment around nudity permeated the *völkisch* movement, and *völkisch* ideologues such as Willibald Hentschel held that the physical beauty of the naked form mirrored the beauty of the soul. As such, clothing “alienated man from his body, which was a divine gift, and thus destroyed his inner equilibrium” (Mosse 1964: 116). This romanticized image of primordial nudity — usually in the form of a fully naked, ethereal blond youth with arms outstretched — became an icon of German Aryanism and was a favorite motif of the symbolist illustrator Karl Höppner, better known as Fidus. As Mosse notes, “The love for the nude body which Fidus helped to further, became important in the Youth Movement as representing *the urge for the genuine which required a return to nature* . . .” (1964: 85; emphasis mine). Indeed, the stylistic similarities between the nude figures found in the paintings of Schuon and those in the symbolist illustrations of Fidus are much more conspicuous than Schuon’s ostensible claim to classical Hindu iconography (see n. 46 above).

It is thus through the metaphysics of “sacred nudity” and the above notion of the Virgin as “corresponding directly to esoterism” and “above all theological and liturgical particularization” that Schuon’s previously noted distinction between the *religio perennis* as “the body” and the *religio formalis* as “the garment” is made explicitly clear. Schuon’s conceit of “sacred nudity” thus nostalgically seeks a return to what he elsewhere refers to as “the Golden Age” before “the Semitic religions” found it “necessary to clothe [the truth] in an argument efficacious for certain mentalities . . .” (1976: 146; emphasis mine).

Indeed, in another 1981 letter, Schuon expounds on the reasons for the unique nature of his *ṭarīqa* as not only because of “our purely esoteric perspective,” but also “the fact of the contents of our consciousness, given us by our Western origin; and then the Vedānta as a metaphysical foundation . . .” (1995: 5). Schuon then relates that “our point of departure is the quest after esoterism and not after a particular religion; after the pure and total Truth, not after a sentimental mythology” (1995: 5). In seemingly direct relation to this statement, Schuon further on asserts that while the non-dual Vedantic philosophy of “Shankara is altogether clear and unambiguous; Ibn ‘Arabī, on the contrary, is uneven, tortuous, obscure and ambiguous, despite all his merits. *Quite generally we recognize in Hinduism the great resonance of the primordial religion . . .*” (1995: 6; emphasis mine). Schuon thus declares, “[W]e take our stand on Shankarāchārya, not on an Ibn ‘Arabī; *the latter we accept only insofar as we find in him something of the Vedānta*” (1995: 6; emphasis mine).

As early as 1975, in *Form and Substance in the Religions* [*Forme et substance dans les religions*], Schuon had indeed “found” in Ibn ‘Arabī “something of the Vedānta” through recourse to the Virgin Mary. Here, Schuon notes:

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, after declaring that his heart “has opened itself to all forms,” and that it is “a cloister for monks, a temple of idols, the Kaaba,” adds: “I practice the religion of Love”; now *it is over this formless religion that, Semitically speaking, Sayyidatna Maryam presides, thus identifying herself with the Supreme Shakti . . .*

SCHUON 2002: 118 underline mine

In a footnote, Schuon qualifies this statement by noting that while Ibn ‘Arabī specifies that the “religion of Love” is “Islam,” he was “doubtless obliged to do so in order to avoid a charge of heresy, and he could do so in good conscience by understanding the term *islām* in its direct and universal meaning” (2002: 118 n. 16).

In light of the above, Schuon’s reference in the same work to “the ‘Marian’ or ‘shaktic’ aspect in the path of Ibn Arabi” emerges as a discursive strategy that

decouples the Aryan “aspect” of Ibn ‘Arabī’s esotericism from his *other* Semitic aspect (2002: 106; emphasis mine). This decoupling is facilitated not only by the establishment of a metaphysical link between Ibn ‘Arabī and an Aryanized Mary, but also through Schuon’s above categorization of Ibn ‘Arabī’s “religion” as “formless” as well as interpreting Ibn ‘Arabī’s religious identification with Islam as merely an opportunistic concession. As “the universal *Shakti*,” Mary represents for Schuon “the *Sophia Perennis*” and “the feminine aspect of the *Logos*” (2002: 115, 2004b: 170). Thus, it is not insignificant that Schuon should choose to associate Ibn ‘Arabī with Mary *qua Logos*, even though Ibn ‘Arabī famously identified himself as “the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood” (*khātam al-walāya al-muḥammadiyya*) and thus the principle manifestation of the Muhammadan *Logos* on earth — that is, the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*)⁴⁸ — the esoteric nature of which Schuon himself had written about in detail (1987: 48–63).⁴⁹

Conclusion

While Schuon clearly understood the ultimate prophetic and cosmic authority Ibn ‘Arabī conferred upon Muhammad, he chose to reject openly this Muhammadan prophetology in his interpretation of the Andalusian Sufi. In enunciating “the ‘Marian’ or ‘shaktic’ aspect in the path of Ibn Arabi,” Schuon imagined another cosmic figure to associate Ibn ‘Arabī with — one more aligned with the so-called “formlessness” of Aryan metaphysics. In literally painting this “shaktic” image of Mary as naked, Schuon denudes her of her Semitic clothing, for, as he notes, “*dress is form*.” Thus, by asserting that Ibn ‘Arabī’s “religion of love” is presided over by the “Supreme *Shakti*,” Schuon endeavors to remove the Semitic “style” of Muhammad — the *religio formalis* — from Ibn ‘Arabī while simultaneously seeking to “find in him something of the Vedānta” — that is, the pure Aryan metaphysics of the *religio perennis*.

Schuon’s radically selective reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s discourse, and subsequent construction of his “Marian” image, is thus a lucid example of what McCutcheon has called the “cosmogonic” activity of the “‘art’ of hermeneutics,”

48 See Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004: 243; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1966: 64; Chodkiewicz 1993: 120, 125; Addas 1993: 77–78, 200.

49 As Nasr points out, Schuon’s article “The Spiritual Significance of the Substance of the Prophet” “reveals a very rare intimacy with *al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah*” (2006: 263).

where a “very particular present” is universalized through ideological appeals to “mythic time” (2001: 172–173). As we have seen, Schuon’s transhistorical rhetoric is thoroughly intertwined with his ideal of “sacred nudity” as a “return to the essence, the origin, the archetype, [and] thus to the celestial state.” Indeed, this transcendent location is also reflected in Schuon’s notion of pure esotericism as “the *total truth* as such,” which he likewise traces to a primordial “Golden Age” before “the Semitic religions” found it “necessary to *clothe*” the truth. For Schuon, any esotericism connected to a particular religious form is thus liable to “enter into theological, psychological, and legalistic meanders *foreign to its nature*.” This for Schuon is precisely the problem with “ordinary Sufism,” which is an esotericism *veiled* by its Islamic accretions.

Just as nineteenth-century European scholars imagined racial difference to be the cause of religious diversity, Schuon frequently pronounces on the qualities of the Aryan and Semitic “mentality” or “spirit” as confirmed within his essentialized interpretations of their respective religions. Schuon thus strikingly echoes his Aryanist predecessors, such as Renan and Chamberlain, in asserting that the universal metaphysical truths of Vedanta and Platonism are indicative of the “‘naturally supernatural’ capacity” of Aryan “intellecionism” and “objectivity,” whereas the moralism and voluntarism of Islamic Sufism are reflective of a particularist and passive Semitic “inspirationism” that is ultimately “subjectivist” in its approach.

Schuon’s racist appropriation of Ibn ‘Arabī as a strategy for authenticating and universalizing a historically situated ideal of religious subjectivity holds crucial implications not only for how we read Perennialist constructions of Ibn ‘Arabī and Sufism, which have enjoyed a resurgence post-9/11, but also for pluralist discourse more broadly. As McCutcheon importantly points out, “all social formation relies on a kind of sleight of hand whereby all-inclusive systems arise from premises that are fundamentally exclusive” (2001: 33). Indeed, schemas of religious universalism — although ostensibly justified in the context of global modernity — come culturally burdened with buried orders of religious authenticity that have the potential power to effect negative socio-political consequences and yet often remain unacknowledged.

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